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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAKU 001859

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL AJ

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN INDEPENDENT UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

CONTINUE HUNGER STRIKE

Classified By: ACTING DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION JOAN POLASCHIK PER 1.4(B, D)

¶1. (SBU) Approximately 100-150 former students of the closed Azerbaijan Independent University (AIU) remain on hunger strike in protest of the slow trial proceedings to determine their academic fate. AIU was closed by the Ministry of Education (MOE), along with 17 other private academic institutions on May 5, on the grounds that these institutions had not met state accreditation standards. While third and fourth year students were transferred to other institutions, the admission of the 1,700 first and second year students was essentially revoked. Nearly 150 of these students filed a lawsuit against the MOE seeking reinstatement of admission, in order to be allowed to transfer to other institutions to complete their studies. This is the second major hunger strike related to AIU's closure.

¶2. (C) Poloff visited the hunger strikers, who have staged their protest at opposition Musavat Party headquarters, on December 22. (NOTE: Musavat Party Chair Isa Gambar explained that the party has nothing to do with the strike, but that Musavat had been the only party to offer its premises to the students after they had sent a request to many other organizations.) At the time of the visit, around 35 to 40 students were present at the site of the protest. One student explained that between 100 and 150 students were participating in the hunger strike on a rotating basis. He said that 25 students have been hospitalized at some point during the month-long strike, but had each resumed the hunger-strike after being treated. According to the group, these students plan to continue the protest until a verdict in the ongoing trial is reached.

¶3. (C) According to December 19 press reports, four of the hunger-strikers had sewn their mouths shut to demonstrate their commitment to the protest. Gambar told Poloff that the Musavat Party leadership had asked those students to leave, insisting that none of them seriously risk their lives. In addition, Musavat requires the female hunger strikers to return home each night, because, as Gambar explained, Musavat's public image would be damaged if there was a perception that boys and girls were spending the night together at the party's headquarters. He said that party members were ensuring the students had enough water, although most water was being purchased with the students' own resources. Gambar also said that doctors who were Musavat members were regularly checking on the participants.

¶4. (C) Over 100 students attended the third session of the trial on December 21, during which several students testified that an MOE official had visited AIU prior to the university's closure, and had told students "not to worry" about the accreditation issue. One of the hunger-striking students told Poloff that the judge is intentionally dragging his feet on issuing a verdict, ostensibly because he is

waiting on instructions from the MOE. The next session is scheduled for December 28; we will continue to monitor the situation and report on developments.

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